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ABSTRACT

This study reported the role of counselors as perceived by black students in a secondary school. Observational and interview methods were employed to obtain data from 24 black students selected at random from the junior and senior classes of a large metropolitan secondary school. Findings include: counselors were essentially concerned with administrative tasks (scheduling); contacts with counselors were related to academic problems; frequency of contacts were minimal (annual); students with personal problems would look outside the school for help. The need for organizational patterns which would make counseling services more accessible was suggested. (Author)

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Delivery Systems: "Saber Tooth" Effect in Counseling

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Introduction

During the school year of 1970-71 a study of the school social system of selected black students was initiated at Wheatfield High School in Big City. The overall purpose of the study was to contribute to the "reality" of what "Being Black in School" was like. The focus was on the school activity, interaction and norm system as perceived by black students. Included was the student's perception of and feelings about the curriculum, faculty, service personnel, administration, activities, and the nature of "influence" within the school. The findings are reported elsewhere.[1]

Objectives of the Inquiry

The purposes of this paper is to report the "reality" of the counselor role in this integrated secondary school of 1700 students as perceived by black students. Specifically, the questions being asked were: How do black students view the counselors in this school? What services do they perceive as being available from counselors? What is the nature of black students contacts with counselors? What is the frequency of their contacts with counselors? To whom do these black students take problems of a personal and/or academic nature?

Methods

Field methodology utilizing non-participant observation and interviews were employed. The principal investigator and two graduate assistants were in the building at least two days a week for the school year 1970-1971. Observation of students in classrooms, library, cafeteria, halls, offices, were supplemented with interviews of students and teachers.

[1]"Being Black in School". A report of an observational field study of the school social systems of black students in a secondary school. In process.

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The source of interview data was from 23 randomly selected junior and senior black students. Selection was made to insure balance of students who were having no academic difficulty (achievers) and students who had failed at least one course (non achievers). Table 1 indicates the characteristics of students in the interview schedule. Each student was interviewed a total of four times; the first interview in early October, the fourth in May. Interviews were scheduled with

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Insert Table 1 about here

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the students at a time students agreed as convenient. Each interview was taped and lasted approximately one hour.

The observation schedule was both formal and informal. Informal observations were made of the students in the regular "flow" of the day -- in the hall, parking lot, cafeteria, office. Formal observations of each student was made through attendance in selected classes for two week blocks of time -- one week by the principal investigator, one week by a graduate assistant.

Results

Since these findings are taken from a more comprehensive study of the school social system of black students, data from two rounds of interviews are appropriate to the questions raised earlier. The second interview was concerned with the extent of students acquaintance with school personnel. On the basis of reactions to this interview, the third interview included an explanation of the nature of their contacts with school personnel, including the counselor.

These junior and senior students all had been enrolled in this secondary school for their high school career. When asked to name members of the staff -- teachers, administration, nurse, etc., most were able to "name" the members of the

"administration". They knew the name of the principal; one of the assistant principals (the one responsible for discipline); and one of the three counselors (the counselor assigned to their class for scheduling courses). In each case the counselor was classified as one of the "administration". (See Table 2).

Knowing the name of key administrative personnel was not always related to "contacts" with them. (Table 2.) A contact was considered any kind of a personal verbal interaction, individually or in groups. Since in this school, administratively the scheduling of courses was accomplished by a conference with the counselor, it is difficult to explain how seven students were able to accomplish this task without a contact with the counselor. A question could be raised about the reliability of the responses or the reliability of their memories.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Table 3 reports the nature of the students contact with the counselor. Each of the students reporting contacts with the counselor indicated it related to planning a schedule for the coming year. Three of the students indicated an additional contact. The substance of this contact was administrative. To use the words of one female student: "at the midsemester I was failing geometry. The counselor called me in." "What happened in the interview?" "He told me I needed to have a talk with my teacher". "Did you have one?" "No". "What happened?" "I failed geometry".

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Insert Table 3 about here

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During the third round of interviews an attempt was made to determine the degree

to which these students saw the school as having resources available to them to help them with problems. Table 4 reports the results of students responses to this inquiry. Some elaboration is needed to get the "flavor" of the context. Most students initially did not respond to the question as written. Clarification was necessary. The categories in Table 4 were suggested.

While most students viewed the teacher as a primary resource of academic problems the total number is only slightly above half. In the personal-social-vocational area students either looked to peers both in school or out of school, or parents and relatives. An interesting addition was in the case of female students. Over half of these students indicated they would talk to the woman security guard. Our own interviews with teachers, administrators and counselors and our observations of student behavior in classes, halls, etc. support these reports.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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Summary, conclusions and discussion

Harold Benjamin in 1939 wrote a book, The Saber Tooth Curriculum. A generous interpretation could include: techniques and tools are developed to solve problems. These are then incorporated into a system designed to facilitate the dissemination of these tools, techniques and strategies to others so that problems can be solved by others. A tendency then exists and is manifest to maintain the system . . . it becomes an end in itself. We teach how to attack saber tooth tigers when they no longer exist. The goods and services of the system no longer are appropriate for the demands of the culture. The isolation from the action reduces the effectiveness of the system.

While the analogy has weaknesses we see similarities. Educators in the age of

the saber tooth tiger made adequate analyses of the skills, competencies and understandings necessary to do the task but then retreated into the classroom. The performance of these outcomes in class was considered an end in itself. No application to the real world was attempted or encouraged. The counselors in Wheatfield High School were all certified. The skills possessed included understandings related to educational, vocational, personal and social adjustment. They included skills in interpersonal relations. They completed practica attesting to their abilities to apply these skills. Yet, in this school they were insulated from application of these skills to these students.

The year of the study, Wheatfield High had two rather serious racial disturbances. Feelings between races were tense at times during the year. The students in our sample indicated in the interviews that a number of problems related to social adjustment were strong at various times. It seemed paradoxical that the resources assembled by the school most qualified to help with these problems were not viewed by the students as resources. Our data indicated that these students would turn to other peers, adults outside of school, parents and ministers, in that order.

Since a number of female students indicated they would turn to the woman security guard for help in a problem situation we spent time observing the performance of this employee. She was middle aged, attractive, black. She was always where the action was, in the hall, cafeteria, restrooms, parking lot -- accessible. It appeared that in the course of a day she had brief exchanges of an informal nature with most of the students in the school. Students knew her. She was around. Heider suggested that proximity related to interaction. Interaction related to induction of positive sentiments.

The contacts with counselors were unfoundly related to a narrow specific task.

It is understandable that these contacts provided the basis for role expectation. If you have a problem with your schedule or need to change a class, see the counselor. If you have a personal problem, go to someone who solves personal problems. Since the students in our sample had no experience to draw on that associated counselors with the solution of problems they turned to one whom they liked, or at least knew, or at least was accessible.

It is proposed that in Wheatfield High careful consideration be given to the machinery for delivering the services available from counselors to the point of need. Services available are related to the skills and competencies of counselors as attested to by their training. Included are skills related to personal and social adjustment, individual and group counseling, listening and theoretical backgrounds that would enable more adequate description and interpretation of problems. Our data suggest that students need to perceive counselors as having these competncies and interests -- that these concerns are as legitimate to the counselor role as scheduling students for classes. Since the perception of the counselor role is based on contacts with the counselor, the activity of counselor - student contacts must include and highlight the services he (she) <u>can</u> offer and minimize the routine (planning schedules) dimensions of the role.

Another factor necessary for delivering services is to make them accessible. Again our data indicate the confidentiality and security of an office removed from regular flow of student activity may have distinct disadvantages. Counselors need to be accessible . . . where the action is. It is possible students turn with their problems to someone who is "around and available". It is also possible that the staff member who is "around and available" will also be able to provide a useful role in describing the environment or context of the school with more reliability. With the stresses and strains that exist within the schools today, reliable descriptions of elements of the social environment have to be useful.

Table 1

Characteristics of students in the interview sample

	Achievers		Non Achievers		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
Juniors	2	4	3	3	12
Seniors	3	3	2	3	11
Totals	5	7	5	6	23

Table 2

		Number	Principal		Asst. Prin.		Asst. Prin.		Counselor	
			Named	Contact	Named	Contact	Named	Contact	Named	Contact
Junior	Male	5	5	-	5	2	2	2	3	3
	Female	7	4	-	7	3	0	0	5	5
Senior	Male	5	5	2	5	5	2	1	4	4
	Female	6	4	2	6	3	1	0	4	4
	Total	23	18	4	23	13	5	3	16	16

Table 3

Nature of Contact with Counselor

		Number	Routing Scheduling	Academic Difficulty	Personal/Social Problems
Junior	Male	3	3	0	0
	Female	5	5	2	0
Senior	Male	4	4	1	0
	Female	4	4	0	0
	Total	16	16	3	0

Table 4

If you had a problem, who in this school would you seek help from

			Academic		Personal/Social/Vocational			
		Number	Teacher	Administrator	Counselor	Teacher	Adm.	Counsel	Other
Junior	Male	5	3	0	0	0	0	0	
	Female	7	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
Senior	Male	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	
	Female	6	3	0	0	0	0	1*	4
	Total	23	12	0	0	0	0	1*	8

*one senior female student indicated she would seek "council" with a man counselor formerly at this school but now assigned to another school.

1 "other" in this table is limited to the woman security guard